

# *New developments of the ABC model for cognitive-behavioral coaching*

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## Abstract

Cognitive-behavioral coaching (CBC) is an integrative coaching approach, with theoretical roots in the cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) for how changes are obtained, and which encompasses techniques that are already empirically supported in CBT. The most important tool adapted to CBC is the ABC model, which is currently considered a transdiagnostic model and underlies the change process. The ABC model has been reframed by David and Breightmeyer (2018) in order to fit in the coaching process. We describe in this paper the new contextual and positive ABC model for CBC and how it can be used in various steps of the coaching process, from assessment, conceptualization and as a technique in the process, with demonstrated results.

**Key words:** coaching; cognitive-behavioral coaching; ABC model; cognitive-behavioral theory; CBC

Coaching is a personalized development and change method, where the coach is helping the client achieve a goal or overcome practical or emotional difficulties. With this definition, coaching has been first used in business environment to help managers and employees perform better. Nowadays, coaching has grown and has application in various domains like health (Sacco et al., 2004), personal development (Grant, 2008), performance (David et al., 2016), parenting (David et al., 2017) and so on. Compared with counseling or psychotherapy, in coaching there was first the practice and then the research. At the beginning, the coaching intervention had no specific theory for changes in

behaviors or emotions and it was based on general solution focus and problem solving methods, with a general, flexible structure. As is becoming more and more popular, certain frameworks started to adapt their theory to the world of coaching, especially coming from psychotherapy. We have now positive psychology based coaching, systemic coaching, gestalt coaching, and of course cognitive behavioral coaching (CBC).

## COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL COACHING (CBC)

CBC is a form of coaching, derived from the cognitive-behavioral theory, considered to be especially suited for the coaching field (see David &

Bernard, 2018). Cognitive-behavioral theory is a conceptual framework mainly known for its application to psychotherapy (cognitive-behavioral therapy; CBT) developed by Albert Ellis (1962) and Aaron Beck (1876). The main idea of the CBT is that not the external events makes us feel in a certain way but our interpretation of the events. From the CBT perspective, in order to make a stable in time change in one's emotions and behaviors we need to change our cognitions (Bernard & David, 2018). CBT uses cognitive disputing, problem solving strategies, imaginary techniques and homework between sessions in order to promote the cognitive change. CBC took from CBT the conceptual framework as well as some techniques and the structure of the sessions. In CBC coaches use evaluation before the coaching process in order to see all the aspects of a client's objective; use conceptualization in order to explain the difficulty to the client and how their mind works and also use the practice from one session to the next one to better implement the change. Even though CBC is a more active, short and practical intervention than CBT, long time changes are promoted by changing the cognitions.

### THE ABC MODEL

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The ABC model (Ellis, 1962) it is the transdiagnostic and the cornerstone model in CBT (and thus also in CBC), based on which the main assumption of the theory is used to explain to the clients how the beliefs are the causes for their reactions (e.g., behaviors, emotions). Being able to make a distinction between the event, seen as clear and unbiased as possible, the thoughts that came to one's mind and the generated emotions and behaviors helps people to better realize that by changing their cognitions they can change the way they feel and react to a certain situation. In the ABC model, A stands for "activation event". The activating event is the unbiased situation. When working with clients we can think of "what a video camera can see". For example, when a student has to present a paper in front of the teacher and colleagues, the activating event is the presentation of the paper, in a room, how many students were there, how many teachers, where the student sits, where the teacher sits. A video camera cannot see what the student is thinking, or feeling.

The "B" in the ABC model stands for beliefs. From the CBT perspective beliefs cause emotional and behavioral reactions to a certain activating event (A). This beliefs are mental structures that are formed throughout somebody's life through extracting

statements that act as a rule from the events, mostly from the negative events. Going through negative events the mind extracts general conclusion from them in order to generate a coping response. Most of the time, these general conclusions are irrational and are called irrational beliefs. Usually people are not used to analyze a situation in order to be aware of their thoughts. Specific questions are used by practitioners to detect client's thoughts like "What thoughts did you have in that situation?", "Does the situation say something about yourself/other/world?", "What words came into your mind in that exact moment?". Sometimes thoughts are easy to find and sometime it need a little bit of time. In our example, the student might think "I will fail, it will be an awful presentation", "I will receive a bad grade", "My colleagues will think I am not smart enough". This are examples of beliefs that a person in that situation could have.

The "C" in the ABC model stands for consequences. The consequences are generated by the beliefs "Bs" and can be affective, behavioral or physiological. The affective consequences are the emotions and are the easiest to detect, practitioners just ask the client "How did you feel in that situation?". Behavioral consequences are the action a person did in the activating event, and the physiological consequences are the biological changes caused by the emotion itself of the somatization of that emotion. In our example, the student's Cs might be anxiety (the affective level), leaving the room (the behavioral level) and stomachache (the physiological level).

In order to help somebody overcome a difficult situation we need to change the way that person evaluates the situation. We can do that by changing their beliefs. Beliefs are not easily changeable structures, so this process needs time. Clients need to find alternative health beliefs to replace the irrational ones, and which generate adaptive Cs (functional emotions and behaviors). In CBC the cognitive change might take less than it does in CBT because in coaching we work with high functional people.

### The use of the ABC model in CBC

A new framework for the use of the ABC model in CBC was developed by David and Breightmeyer (2018). Their contextual and positive ABC model (see *Figure 1, page 3*) is based on the traditional ABC model but it is adapted and modified to fit in the coaching process, by including also in this conceptualization the positive approach of CBC and emphasizing the contextual levels of the issues. In this new model, in the first step we look at positive and negative events or changes, such as opportunities or threats.

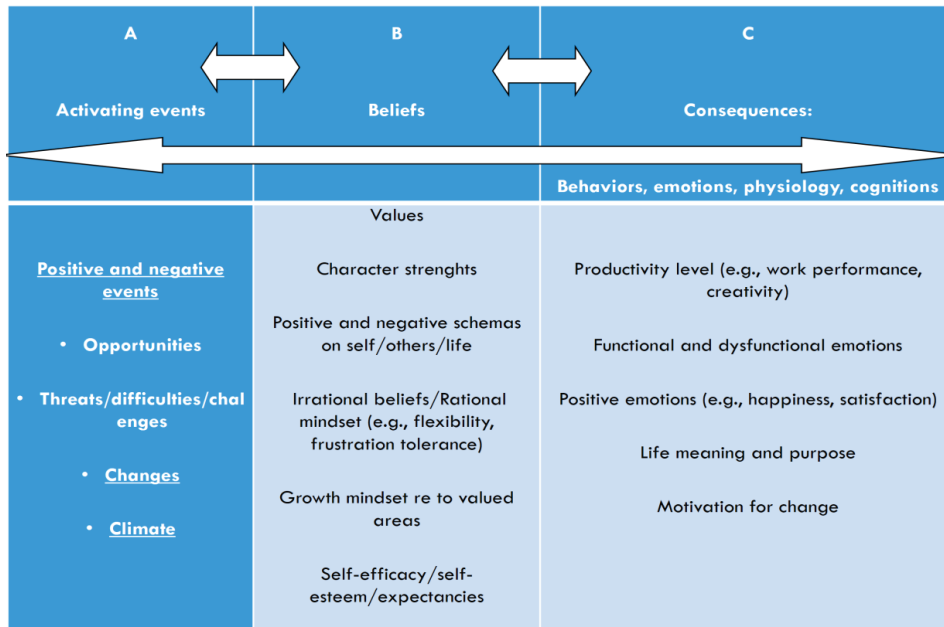


Figure 1: Contextual and positive ABC model

Then, in the second step -B, besides the traditional irrational beliefs, we also assess the positive mechanisms for wellness, such as unconditional acceptance of self/others/life, positive and negative schemas, values and growth mindset. At the end, when assessing the consequences (Cs) besides emotions we look at productivity level, strengths, life purpose and motivation of change, that emerge from Bs. This development of the new model is perfectly suitable to the CBC process and the aspects and skills that are targeted in this kind of process. The contextual approach of the model is meant to emphasize the importance of a situational approach when assessing the elements of the model and when designing changes (e.g., changing behaviors at work).

**Using ABC model in CBC assessment**

We can use the ABC model in CBC at the beginning at the process, for evaluation. When we first start working with a new client we need to know where we start from, so we perform the evaluation. The ABC model is used to evaluate clients` beliefs and emotions. At the beginning of the coaching process we can perform ABC models in order to assess what are the most frequent irrational cognitions of the client and what are the most frequent

consequences of them (dysfunctional emotions and behaviors). This helps us better guide our process and better select the models or techniques.

**Using the ABC model in CBC conceptualization**

We can use the ABC model in conceptualization we offer to the client in CBC. Indeed, CBC was defined as an integrative approach that used the cognitive-behavioral framework to guide its change process. After we perform the evaluation, we need to explain to the clients the mechanisms that can alleviate their difficulties or blocks towards the goals in a conceptualizing process, based on the cognitive-behavioral theory. We can use an example of ABC model on a specific situation from the clients` life and explain how the way they think about that specific situation make them feel and act in that way. The new contextual and positive ABC model (David & Breightmeyer, 2018) can be easily used for conceptualization as well. Being developed especially for coaching it offers the coach the structure needed to explain to the clients the cause of their difficulties or the way to achieve their goals. This new model encompasses all the aspects that need to be addressed before working on a goal because not only it looks at one`s way of thinking but it takes into

consideration the habits, threats and strengths, purpose of life and motivation to change. These aspects are important for both clients and coaches because it offers a general image on the clients' life and they can better calibrate the intervention.

### Using the ABC model in the coaching process

We can also use the ABC model in the coaching process (Bernard & David, 2018) on emotional goals or to overcome obstacles towards a practical goal. When we have clients that want to emotional develop or to increase their emotional intelligence abilities the best tool to use is the ABC model extended (ABCDEFG) by Dryden (2018). This model targets the root of the problem and makes the change stable in time. The extended model was adapted to fit to the coaching process and D stands for disputing which is changing the irrational cognitions of the clients, E stands for effect of the disputation, namely the rational cognitions, F stands for facilitating the change or functional consequences or new philosophy of life and G for goal for change which is the new "C", the adaptive emotional or behavioral consequences.

Another way to use the ABC model in the coaching process is as an adjuvant to another model or techniques or to overcome obstacles. Even when the coach and the client agreed together to a plan in order to achieve client's goal anxiety, anger or frustration can interfere. It can interfere when clients need to implement the change by themselves, or after trying an alternative and failing. In these types of situations the practitioners can use the ABC model to make the clients overcome their emotions and also to build a health way of thinking that promotes change and helps them implement the change.

David and Cobeanu (2016) have tested the efficacy of ABC model in a CBC training program. Specifically, participants had to practice the ABC model in a role play environment during a course and then to fill a weekly ABC forms for a period of two months. After the program participants reported lower irrational beliefs, specifically the demandingness and general evaluation of others and self. Also, they found that changes in cognitions are predictors for changes in the depressed mood (David & Cobeanu, 2016). In another study, David and collaborators (2014) used the

ABC model to analyze the irrational beliefs, their consequences and methods of disputing. The ABC forms were completed by participants as a part of the personal development component in a cognitive-behavioral intervention and their result showed that demandingness, awfulizing and global evaluation are most frequently associated with anxiety, while low frustration tolerance is associated with anger. Moreover, over 60% of the disputations were efficiently performed using the ABC model and the pragmatic cognitive restructuring was the most frequent used.

We can thus conclude that the ABC model is a powerful tool in coaching that can be used at any stage of the CBC process and helps both the coach by easing the process and the clients, by achieving the goal and building on their mental health. ■

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